

What role did anti-Semitism play in the ambitions and policies of the National Socialist (Nazi) Workers' Party and its policies from 1920-1938? What factors explain the shifting nature and centrality of anti-Semitism to the Nazi party over time?

From its roots in the 1920s to the brink of World War II in 1938, the National Socialist (Nazi) Workers' Party's antisemitism evolved profoundly, spurred by both internal and external forces. Initially a rallying tool to garner support, it steadily hardened, becoming a central pillar of Nazi philosophy and governance by the late 1930s. Factors that facilitated this transformation include the economic hardship from the Great Depression, inspiration from segregation policies in the United States, the success of the euthanization program of disabled Germans, and the "Aryan" people's indifference throughout the escalation of the social death of German Jewry.

During the early 1920s, antisemitism was present in Nazi propaganda, but it primarily functioned as a mechanism to mobilize support by scapegoating Jews for Germany's economic and political woes in the aftermath of World War I. The Nazis exploited prevalent antisemitic sentiments, accusing Jews of triggering Germany's defeat, the punitive Treaty of Versailles, the hyperinflation crisis, and the Weimar Republic's instability. This can be seen in their 25-point program of 1920, a document outlining the party's nationalistic goals and embedding several provisions against Jews. The Program leverages the "Stab in the Back" theory to implicitly blame Jews for Germany's World War I defeat. For instance, the Program demands the annulment of the Treaty of Versailles and the expulsion of all "non-Germans" who arrived after the onset of Germany's participation in World War I ("The Program" 15). These directives contest the Treaty's terms and implicate Jews in Germany's defeat and its punitive aftermath. However, this stage did not envisage the genocidal designs that would later crystallize.

The arrival of the Great Depression and the Nazis' adept manipulation of antisemitic sentiments propelled the party's popularity, amplifying the centrality of antisemitism to the Nazi agenda. Hitler's 1925 book, *Mein Kampf*, linked Jews to perceived societal threats such as capitalism, communism, liberalism, and modern culture, while framing attacks on Jews as necessary for preserving an Aryan Germany. He metaphorically depicted Jews as infectious germs, underscoring their supposed detrimental impact on German society (Sarah Stein, "Social Death," 2023). By tying antisemitism to current issues rather than just implicating Jews for the consequences of World War 1, the Nazi party had started gradually moving from using antisemitism as a convenient political tool to considering it central to their agenda. Yet, even at this stage, Hitler stopped short of advocating for the annihilation of Jews.

With Hitler's ascension to the Chancellorship in 1933, antisemitism metamorphosed from a politically convenient ideology into institutionalized policy. Hitler introduced domestic laws mirroring discriminatory practices found abroad, such as the Jim Crow laws and forced sterilization in the United States. These took form in the Sterilization Law of 1933, the KdF's Euthanasia program, and the Nuremberg Laws of 1935. Notably, the euthanasia program, aimed at eliminating the disabled perceived as racially impure, marked the Nazi's transition from persecution to genocide (Sarah Stein, "Race Hygiene and Eugenics," 2023). The efficiency of mass murder learned here was later applied to the genocide of Jews during the Holocaust. Additionally, the codification of anti-Jewish discrimination legitimized and amplified pre-existing antisemitism, accelerating the social demise of German Jewry.

The muted response from both the German populace and the international community towards the escalating antisemitic policies further emboldened the Nazis. For instance, the indifference towards the Nuremberg Laws encouraged the Nazis to go further and "Aryanize" the

economy (Sarah Stein, "Social Death," 2023). Simultaneously, Hitler's diplomatic pact with the Pope, which guaranteed the Nazi regime's recognition in exchange for respecting the Catholic Church's rights, calmed many German Catholic clergy who might have otherwise objected to the Nazis' policies (Bergen 79). By 1938, with the orchestrated violence of Kristallnacht, antisemitism had escalated from a political tool to an entrenched, core doctrine of the Nazi Party, preluding the impending atrocities of the Holocaust.

The transformation of antisemitism from a political tool to a fundamental and destructive force within the National Socialist (Nazi) Workers' Party from 1920 to 1938 was a multi-faceted process. It was driven by a confluence of the socio-political climate, economic hardships, ideological evolution, external influences, and the opportunistic manipulation of societal sentiments by the Nazi leadership. The Nazi party capitalized on existing prejudices and socio-economic upheaval to amplify antisemitic sentiment, resulting in a deeply entrenched doctrine that would shape the Party's horrific policies and actions in the years to come.

References

Doris Bergen, *War and Genocide*, Chapters 3 and 4.

“The Program of the National Socialist (Nazi) German Workers’ Party ,” in Arad et al,
Documents on the Holocaust.

Sarah Stein, "Social Death," HIST 5 (lecture, UCLA, 2023)

Sarah Stein, ""Race Hygiene and Eugenics," HIST 5 (lecture, UCLA, 2023)